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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [MOPS](#) [SOCI](#) [PINS](#) [ER](#)  
SUBJECT: ERITREA'S FRUSTRATED FORMER FIGHTERS

REF: A. ASMARA 273  
[1](#)B. ASMARA 290

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald K. McMullen for reason 1.4 (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: The 95,000 veterans of Eritrea's 30-year war for independence made huge sacrifices for their country's independence and for the opportunity for better lives. Many "former fighters" (as they are known) are growing increasingly embittered with Isaias' continued brutal dictatorship and failed economic policies. "For what purpose did I sacrifice my age?" asks one bitter former EPLF guerrilla who spent 16 years fighting for Eritrea's independence. He claims that now "in Asmara, every house hates this government, but all are afraid because there are spies everywhere." END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) DID WE FIGHT FOR THIS?  
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September 1 is a holiday marking the start in 1961 of Eritrea's armed independence struggle. When Eritrea finally achieved liberation 30 years later, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) had perhaps 95,000 men and women under arms. These "former fighters" are today esteemed by the Eritrean people and are afforded some meager privileges by the Isaias regime. Many former fighters suffered multiple wounds, sacrificed opportunities for formal education, abandoned occupations and houses, lost numerous brothers and sisters in arms, and were separated from their families for years. They are also confident and proud of the key role they played in Eritrea's independence saga. Perhaps because of their pride, experience, and sacrifices, many feel they have a special responsibility to Eritrea; a growing number are dismayed that their dream of a free and prosperous Eritrea has turned into a nightmare.

[1](#)3. (C) "WE WILL HAVE TO DO SOMETHING"  
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Emboff spent an hour with an extremely frustrated and embittered former fighter August 24. The former fighter ran away from home at age 15 and joined the EPLF. Trained as a mortarman, he fought against Ethiopian, Soviet, and Cuban troops and was wounded four times over the course of 16 years of combat. His commitment to Eritrea is unshakable and indisputable. "We wanted a free and democratic country where

our people could live in peace and have good lives, but now look what we have." Expressing a sense of helplessness, the former fighter said, "Eritrea's future is in America's hands." When emboff disagreed and said that the people of Eritrea will determine their own country's future, he nodded and said, "Then we will have to do something."

¶4. (C) SPIES EVERYWHERE  
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Emboff understood the former fighter's comment to mean he (or former fighters collectively) would have to take direct action to change the situation. Emboff cautioned the individual that the USG does not support or endorse any such action. He also noted that it would be very dangerous for anyone to plan to move against the government. The former fighter acknowledged that the regime has spies everywhere, some even spying on their own families. While everyone hates the government, he claimed, anyone speaking out or organizing against it is quickly - at this point the former fighter made a plucking motion with his hand.

¶5. (C) "HOW LONG MUST WE SUFFER?"  
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Emboff observed that dictatorships are often surprisingly enduring and difficult to change or overthrow. The former fighter said that the Eritrean people had already suffered too long, and claimed the time was ripe for change. He said he had no knowledge of the August 13 alleged assassination attempt against President Isaias (ref A). The former fighter contended that more years of the Isaias regime would wreck the country that he and his comrades had fought so hard to create. Emboff cautioned that plotting or acting against the regime would not only put the individual at risk, but also his family, circle of friends, and his employer. He suggested the former fighter, who may already be on the Office of National Security wanted list, keep his head down, his mouth shut, and his eyes and ears open.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: The regime at times sends agents to make false approaches to sound out, entrap, or embarrass diplomats, although this former fighter was convincingly sincere. We have no survey or statistical data to corroborate his sense of growing disillusionment and fear, but certainly the swelling number of young Eritreans (ref B) fleeing the country attests to hard times and lack of hope in Eritrea. Many of those fleeing are not of the Struggle Generation; the former fighters, being older, may be less keen to flee and try to start life over in another country. If change does come to Eritrea, former fighters working with active duty soldiers are likely to provide the impetus and the muscle. END COMMENT.

MCMULLEN